Tim Rollins and K.O.S

Francis Upritchard: *A Hand of Cards*
Nottingham Contemporary
21 July – 30 September

The two groups of figures in the two galleries given over to this exhibition of mostly new work by Francis Upritchard have distinct personalities. In the first room, the figures – made from modelling material, each approximately two-foot in height and placed on angular black steel pedestals raising them to eye level – collectively titled *War Dance*, are all in a diminished state of attire, mostly wearing nothing but silk pantaloons and undergarments. If this is an army about to enter battle, then it one that has been the victim of a surprise attack while the troops were sleeping – such was the surprise that only one of the figures has managed to get its chainmail on. Nonetheless, the dozen or so skinny soldiers of this archaic-looking platoon seem on fighting form, each in an attacking stance, arms and legs aloft, ready to strike.

The similarly sized characters in the second room are also poised on angular raised pedestals, but here dotted among oversize tankards (oversize both for this bevy of oddballs and for us), glass eggs on bronze armatures and intricately detailed bowls. They seem more lackadaisical – nymphlike souls posed in a variety of lifelike stances, either dressed in bright, gay costumes, or nude, exposing their coloured, sometimes patterned, pastry-textured bodies. They are no innocents, however: one yellow fellow – naked except for the beard that extends down from his short, straight moulded hair – presents an erection at half-mast. Nor can they be considered lumpen iconography, if compared, say, to statues of civic or religious purpose; instead, these figures seem full of life and personality. Two of the figures have left silver footprints in the polished black of their tablelike stand, for example, and one can peer up the robe of a prostrate pink character, catching a glimpse of his neatly stitched red pants. Another, of a purple hue, with a mop of George Harrison hair, dressed like the late Beatle might have during one of his spiritual retreats, is posed against a large red carpet hanging – which acts as a partial partition to the gallery – with a green-skinned prophetlike gent who bares his teeth in a grimace. This fairyland of myriad oddballs is both a disturbing and strangely sweet tableau, their individuality retaining one's attention far longer than their more militaristic brethren in the first space.

Despite Upritchard invoking Nottingham's medieval heritage in the exhibition text, the figures' physiognomy fails to place them in any particular geographical or historical context. They are unworldly fictions. A few older works by Upritchard – for example the Buddha-like *Sniffing Stoat Monkey* (2009), the reclining *Sloth Creature* (2004) and *Untitled (Wanker)* (2012), a two-foot man masturbating – encroach upon the museum's other exhibition, a retrospective of Victorian Symbolist Alfred Kubin. Like Kubin's surreal, beautiful, literary drawings of oversize slugs and terrifying octopuses, Upritchard's sculptures, old and new, carve a comprehensible, beguiling path between whimsical figurative realism and a nightmarish embodiment of the recesses of the subconscious.

OLIVER BASCIANO

Tim Rollins & K.O.S.: *The Black Spot*
Talbot Rice Gallery, Edinburgh
4 August – 22 October

At first glance, *The Black Spot* could be an exhibition about the interplay of art and text, the cultural reciprocity of literature and visual art or expanded notions of painting. The paintings and drawings are constituted of the overwriting and overlaying of marks and images on the pages of books, appearing as an intriguing body of images veering between figuration and abstraction, depth and flatness – perhaps a skewed approximation of (or return to) High Modernism.

Close up, passages of literature, music and comic books are visible beneath or between images whose form and content are derived from sources they partially obscure. The pictures – often witty, subversive or playful interpretations of the writings – are a kind of artistic redaction of pages which are themselves the surface or ground for the images. These are integrated, synthesised palimpsests, both literally and symbolically, and this structure lends aesthetic coherence and harmony to the exhibition in spite of its chronological span (1986 to 2012).

The works take on their real significance, though, with an awareness of Tim Rollins's role as a founding member of 1980s collective Group Material and the artist's career-long emphasis on collaborative and participatory practice. In 1981 he began teaching school students in the South Bronx classified as 'learning disabled'. These disenfranchised, neglected youth became K.O.S. (Kids of Survival), who sketched responsively to writings read aloud. Since its beginnings, their practice has been ongoing and generative – the upper gallery exhibits the results of workshops held with young people in Lothian before the opening of the exhibition, inspired by Robert Louis Stevenson's *Treasure Island* (1883).

Unlike many projects in which participation itself is the product, Rollins and K.O.S. are notable for the collective production of works through their collaboration. Critics might carp at the politics of making gallery-oriented 'objects' today, but the strength of these works is that they retain an integrity and aesthetic value in and of themselves, rather than functioning merely as the byproducts of a pedagogic–emancipatory practice. Ultimately, it is on this basis that the works can be judged as visual art. If 'process' is all, why exhibit?

One of the failures of many educational/community-based projects is that, however well intentioned, they attempt to do too much, all at once. And for all Rollins and K.O.S.'s success, there is always a sticking point on issues of ownership and the ethics of collective production versus individual authorship. Are the relationships between Rollins, K.O.S. and their collaborators always equitable? Need they be? Yet the longevity of K.O.S., albeit with moments of internal conflict and friction (along with external gripes about the privileging of Western canonical texts and the focus on painting), suggests that even with these criticisms, something was and is working. That Rollins and K.O.S. view community engagement, teaching and learning as part of a larger political and socially engaged approach to art continues to make them exemplars of participatory practice. It is salutary to see that, in this case, 'participation' need not always be nightmarish. This is a timely issue as the artworld continues to debate whether or not art practice can be genuinely socially engaged, culturally committed, even emancipatory.

SUSANNAH THOMPSON

Beasts of Revelation
DC Moore Gallery, New York
21 June – 3 August

For a show that purports to examine the state of religion in America, *Beasts of Revelation*, an exhibition of 41 paintings, videos, sculptures and photographs, manages neither to be sacrilegious nor pious. By creating supposedly provocative contemporary icons of biblical figures such as Mary Magdalene, Lazarus and Jesus Christ, the participating artists attempt to battle the dangerous influence of conservative Christianity on American politics. But against such powerful forces as talk radio, Fox News and megachurch pastors, their weapons are almost comically blunt.

The works span more than five decades, beginning with Robert Smithson's *Christ Series: Christ Carrying the Cross* (1960), an ink and gouache drawing depicting Jesus looking like the wailing mother in Picasso's *Guernica* (1937). Series such as Duane Michals's tender *Christ in New York* (1981), a set of six photographs that show a Bob Ross lookalike defending homosexuals and mourning over botched abortions, are given inflated value when pitted against inferior works like Roger Brown's *The Beast Rising from the Sea* (1983), a painting of the biblical monster that persecutes Christians during the Apocalypse (whence the show derives its title). In reproduction, it could easily grace the cover of a fantasy novel.

Least provocative of all are the works from the twenty-first century, which dominate the exhibition. These include *JEEZ* (2012) by Joyce Kozloff, a 12 by 12 ft acrylic painting on 36 panels based on the Ebstorf map, a thirteenth-century document that, at the time, encompassed the entire known world. Collaged with various representations of Jesus – the Che Guevara Jesus, the Sistine Chapel Jesus, the Shroud of Turin – the work holds the same fascination as a *Where's Waldo?* illustration. Even tamer are Kay Rosen's *Sweet Jesus, 1/6* (2012), a stained glass wall piece that would look right at home in the sort of New Age church where hymnals are played on a guitar, and *TSIRHC* (2011), a yellow canvas with the Lord's name written backwards in black paint.

The works that manage a charge do so because they are achingly personal rather than merely iconographic. In the slight *Baptism at Pilot Oak* (1980), Jimmy Wright, a gay artist who grew up in a zealously conservative rural Kentucky, conveys a deep sense of shame by depicting a naked young man being baptised by a balding man wearing a tie. In *A Summer Before Vatican II (Tridentine Church)* (1976), another queer artist, Thomas Lanigan-Schmidt, creates a campy diorama of a Catholic cathedral made out of aluminium, glitter, cardboard and plastic devotional statues. It successfully (and flamboyantly) debases the symbolism of a historically homophobic religion.

The Beasts of Revelation in the Apocalypse, if you even believe in such nonsense, won't show up looking like crayon drawings of Jesus Christ (cf Chris Hammerlein's *Untitled*, 2001), but rather like those most feared by today's conservative Christians – immigrants, women, marriage-bound gays. The works in the exhibition aren't a rallying cry for either side, and wouldn't be even if they were made out of shit.

BRIENNE WALSH

Sharon Hayes:
There's So Much I Want to Say to You
Whitney Museum of American Art, New York
21 June – 9 September

Oh, there is, and Sharon Hayes'll talk your ear off. If you're progressively inclined, the kind of open-minded believer in, say, same-sex marriage and affirmative action that a coterie of the NY artworld imagines to be the average museumgoer, you might take a moral lesson. If you vote Republican, or the Tea Party is something you belong to rather than attend, you'll recognise all your bugbears in the artist's indictments of recent warmongering and the ascendancy of corporate power.

Hayes's artistic world is defined by opposing forces of social progress and political malfeasance as illustrated by the collection of LP covers arranged around the museum's walls. These spoken-word anthologies feature public figures ranging from John F. Kennedy and Richard Nixon to Malcolm X and Martin Luther King, and while this gallery of heroes and horrors reflects an almost clichéd reductivism born of left-leaning thought, it also articulates ethical parameters that vest all individual speech with social and political significance, because such speech always expresses power relationships. They also articulate a history of the disenfranchised demanding to be heard in American social and political conversations on the basis of a shared and universal humanity.

As an artist and antiwar activist, Hayes takes these historical and moral precedents seriously; but as suggested in the sense of nostalgia and lost promise evoked by the covers' old-fashioned graphics and photos of subsequently assassinated leaders, such conversations are tinged with absence and, as in a video installation in which Hayes haltingly attempts to recall the kidnapped Patty Hearst's words, the impossibility of entering another person's psyche.

Social, political and sexual intercourse are attempts to surmount this distance, and it is here that one individual risks imposing her will on another, for the distance is insurmountable – truths urgently present in Hayes's two most affecting pieces, *Everything Else Has Failed! Don't You Think It's Time for Love?* (2007) and *I March in the Parade of Liberty, But As Long As I Love You I Am Not Free* (2007–8). In these recordings of public performances, Hayes, addressing a departed lover, melds the anguish of a citizen aghast at militarism and political legerdemain with the regret of a friend who realises too late that she has failed to recognise common ground she shared with her companion. Personally and politically she suffers the absence of likeminded interlocutors. Given the state of American politics, however, it is the voice of disagreement that must be heard and understood, a voice Hayes fails to find. Yet as her work makes clear, it is the unbridgeable space between people that makes compromise an ethical imperative.

JOSHUA MACK